

Throngs Rally in Lithuania To Back Independence Call

RIGA, Latvia, April 7 (Reuters) — At least 200,000 people crowded into a city park today in the Lithuanian capital, Vilnius, to back their Parliament's defiance of President Mikhail S. Gorbachev, witnesses who saw the rally in the neighboring republic said.

The Soviet Union has barred foreign reporters from Lithuania. But a Radio Vilnius reporter, Audrius Braukyla, said the Lithuanian President, Vytautas Landsbergis, told the chanting crowd that there would be no retreat on the Baltic land's March 11 declaration of independence, dismissed as illegal by the Soviet Parliament and denounced by Mr. Gorbachev.

Here in the Latvian capital, the Communist Party split today over its links with Moscow.

In Vilnius, Repeating a battle cry of Lithuania's 14th-century national hero, Duke Gediminas, Mr. Landsbergis said, "Iron will melt to wax and water will turn to stone before we will retreat."

"Are we going to survive persecution and provocation?" he said, and the crowd cried "Yes! Yes!"

An Appeal for Talks

Soviet television, the official press agency Tass and organizers estimated the Vilnius crowd at 300,000.

The gathering adopted an appeal to Mr. Gorbachev calling for talks. It said the independence declaration had been issued by a democratically elected Parliament and supported by a majority of the republic's inhabitants.

"We ask you to do everything to bring about a start to equal negotiations as soon as possible between the republic of Lithuania and the U.S.S.R.," the appeal read. "We express our hope that our message will be understood as the first step of popular diplomacy paving the way toward friendly relations between the republic of Lithuania and the U.S.S.R. peoples."

As the demonstration started, a Soviet military helicopter flew overhead dropping Russian-language leaflets urging Lithuanians to abandon the independence declaration.

Moscow has been increasing military and psychological pressures on Lithuania since the declaration reinstating the republic's pre-1940 independence.

Soviet troops have seized key Government and Communist Party buildings in Vilnius and convoys of military vehicles have driven through the capital in a show of force.

Mr. Gorbachev, warning Lithuania of serious consequences unless it withdraws the declaration, used new executive powers granted to him by the Soviet Parliament last month to order the surrender of firearms and to tighten border security.

He has also denounced a declaration by Estonia's Parliament last week of a step-by-step process leading to independence.

At the Latvian Communist Party Congress here in Riga, nearly one-third of the 792 delegates, seeking independence for Latvia and its party, walked out when the conservative majority tried to defer the meeting until mid-year.

Example of Other Republics

The pro-independence faction, mainly ethnic Latvians, had called on the party to follow the Communists in Lithuania and Estonia by forming a party independent of Moscow.

The 242-member group said it viewed the conservative proposal as an attempt to postpone discussion of Latvian independence.

They immediately went to another hall in the building and one of their leaders, Juris Rosenwald, said, "We will go ahead now and discuss the party program ourselves."



A Soviet helicopter dropping leaflets on people gathered yesterday in Vilnius for the largest pro-independence rally since the Lithuanian Parliament voted to secede from the Soviet Union.

Associated Press